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# THE LABOR PROBLEM ===== IN INDIA =====

BY

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# THE LABOR PROBLEM IN INDIA

By B. P. WADIA

*President, Madras Labor Union*

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Labor conditions in India are exceptional, for in that vast country labor is not organized; it is exploited by the capitalistic class; its interests are not watched by the Government; the working hours are extremely long; the wages are miserably low; the housing problem is in the stage of mere academic and theoretic discussion. The only place where recently an effort has been made to organize labor is the city of Madras, where five unions have been formed—the Madras Labor Union, Madras Tramwaymen's Union, Madras Rickshawallas' Union, Madras Printers' Union, and Madras Railway Workshop Union. I am the President of the first of these and am in America as a representative of all of them. I came here as an advisor to the labor delegate at the International Conference at Washington, D.C.

The tendency of the official policy is to regard Indian labor as subservient to the industrial development of India. Such an attitude may obscure the fact that Indian labor will be allowed to be exploited as hitherto. Capitalistic exploitation, in the name of growing Indian industries, has already taken place, and that ought not to be permitted any longer. The welfare of the Indian laborer should not be sacrificed for the sake of "growing industries"; the betterment of his lot should not be relegated to a second place, and a primary position given to the improvement and growth of young or new industries.

## Hours

The last inquiry into factory conditions in India was conducted in 1908, as a result of which the Factories Act was amended in 1911. That Act is now in force. *The Report of the Indian Factory Labor Commission* admits that "in textile factories excessive hours are frequently worked in cotton mills; in all jute mills weavers are employed for excessive hours," and it makes mention of seventeen and eighteen hours a days in ginning factories; twenty to twenty-two hours in rice and flour mills; the textile factories of Bombay working "four fourteen hours or more"; those of

Ahmedabad and Broach working in summer for fourteen hours and more; mills in Agra working fifteen and a quarter hours per day in summer, and thirteen and three-quarter hours in winter; factories in Delhi working "fourteen, and even fourteen and a half hours." What was the outcome of the Report? The Act was amended, and now "no person shall be employed in any textile factory for more than twelve hours in any one day" (*Indian Factories Act*, Chap. V., para. 28). A textile factory can employ a laborer for twelve hours per day for six days of the week, *i.e.*, seventy-two hours per week. What is the recess in this twelve hours working-day? The Act provides that half-an-hour's recess should be given to the worker. This thirty minutes period is divided between three functions—going out of the mills, taking a meal and returning to the mills. Careful observation carried on in Madras where arrangements are better than in many mills in other places showed that a man does not get more than twelve to thirteen minutes for his actual meal.

The twelve hours day with its ridiculous thirty minutes recess has another side. The workmen in almost all cases live miles away from factories, and as was rightly pointed out by a high Government official recently, "from the standpoint of the worker, the time in going to and returning from the factory must be added to the length of his active day." In Bombay, where tram and train services are available, one hour at the least must be added, and I know instances, in Madras, where the distance has to be walked, that laborers have to leave home at 4.30 a. m. to be at the factory gate at 5.45, and do not reach home till 8 p. m.

The result of this excessive long hours' system is far reaching. It tells on the efficiency of the work; it produces the phenomenon peculiar to Indian factory labor—*viz.*, loitering; it leads to premature exhaustion; it drives the Indian laborer away from the factory, as "the operative becomes unable to stand the strain of work under present conditions at a comparatively early age." Dr. T. M. Nair, in his *Minute of Dissent to the Commission Report*, characterizes the system thus: "A system more likely to bring about degradation of labor is impossible to conceive."

### Wages

I am in a position to give some detailed figures of payment received by workmen in textile factories, which go to prove the miserably low wages prevalent in India. It may be contended that living in India is cheap; but when the rise in the prices of foodstuffs and clothing material is taken into account, when a personal inquiry into the lives of the workmen is made, and when we see the hovels they live in, the food they eat, the clothes they wear, and remember that they are *always in debt*, which is ever-increasing, we cannot but come to the inevitable conclusion that *the scale of wages is scandalously low and is absolutely inadequate to meet the demands of sheer existence at the present time.* It is said that the standard of living



of the Indian workman is low. It is necessary to remember in this connection that the wage allowed him leads to malnutrition, and that the latter has to be remedied before a better standard of living, housing, clothing, etc., can be thought of. The Indian laborer may be addicted to living cheaply; but even the most frugal temperament would not choose malnutrition and all its consequences, for the sake of cheap living; and, further, what about the debt the laborer is constantly incurring? Low wages compel him to borrow at high rates of interest, and with the help of his miserable earnings plus his borrowed money he manages to exist. Life in a dingy hovel on scanty food shows the courage and patience of the Indian laborer. Malnutrition is provable, and all I need to do is to copy the following table, which shows that prisoners in jails are better nourished than the Indian operatives. This explains the remark of the manager of a big Nagpur factory that "those accustomed to mill life regard it as worse than jail life."

STATEMENT SHOWING THE AVERAGE WEIGHTS OF PRISONERS AND OF MILL OPERATIVES\*

Province	Number of prisoners weighed	Average weight in lbs.	Number of operatives, other than weavers weighed.	Average weight in lbs.	Number of weavers weighed	Average weight in lbs.	REMARKS
Bombay -----	2,656	112.12	735	102.093	288	104.810	Average weight of prisoners in the United Provinces, 115.08 lbs.
Central Provinces	1,746	110.45	100	100.92	52	107	
Bengal -----	6,834	106.187	140	107.939	32	106.25	
Eastern Bengal and Assam ---	3,046	110.846	20	108	--	----	Average weight of prisoners in the Rajamundry Central Jail, Madras, generally, 114.38 lbs.
Burma -----	6,340	120.51	42	117.142	--	----	
Madras -----	7,818	114.38	104	103.634	20	98	
United Provinces of Agra and Oudh -----	9,680	115.08	117	107.016	200	110.705	
Punjab -----	5,998	120.42	115	113.808	--	----	

NOTE.—In Bengal probably the most accurate comparison is with prisoners in the United Provinces; in Burma with prisoners in Madras generally, and more particularly with prisoners in the Rajamundry Central Jail, which is situated in the tract from which the majority of the Madras laborers in Burma are recruited.

The problem of wages was not examined by the Factory Commission of 1908. The member of the Indian Civil Service quoted above says, "Labor may be cheap, but life is not," and it is not difficult to prove that India suffers, in more ways than one, *on account of the scandalous wages paid to the laborer; this happens when all the time the capitalists are hoarding wealth—mill agents getting their handsome commissions, and shareholders their big dividends.*

To substantiate these general remarks I give below a few typical figures which can tell their tale more eloquently than my words. Take these earnings of workers in the cotton mills of Bombay, of the jute mills of Bengal, of the leather works of Cawnpore, etc., and compare them with wages of Lancashire and Dundee and other factories in the United Kingdom generally.

*Specimen Wages in the Cotton Mills of Bombay—*

Drawer (card room) -----	\$7.79	} per month
Reeler -----	5.75	
Warper -----	13.50	
Rover -----	8.02	
Doffer (card room) -----	4.20	
Weaver -----	15.64	

Wages are paid monthly, with two to three weeks in arrears.

These sample rates were prevalent in Bombay in 1918, and include War Bonus. Again, these rates are in Bombay, and wages are higher there than in other places. Against this let me give a few items from the Bombay Exchange List for June, 1919:

		Share Value	
	Dividend	Original	Present
Ahmedabad Advance -----	40%	\$166	\$470
Mathradas -----	40%	166	370
Kasturchand -----	40%	166	370
Crescent -----	50%	33	84
Madhowji -----	50%	166	772
Fazalbhai -----	56%	83	280
Bombay Dying -----	70%	83	527
Central India -----	80%	166	870
Sholapur -----	100%	334	3,200
Khatau -----	120%	334	1,230

The dividends do not indicate total net profits; large reserves are carried forward.

*Specimen Wages in Jute Mills—*

Carders -----	\$3.00	} per month
Rovers -----	4.00	
Spinners -----	4.91	
Shifters -----	3.66	
Winders -----	6.00	
Beamers -----	7.33	
Weavers -----	9.00	
Carpenters -----	10.00	
Coolies -----	4.50	

Wages are paid weekly, with one week in arrears.



In 1916-17 there were seventy-one mills running with 39,404 looms, employing 260,199 persons, with a paid-up capital, including debentures, but excluding reserves, amounting to twelve and a quarter million dollars. The annual turnout is 1,000,000 tons of raw material.

The annual average value of the jute trade to Bengal has been computed at \$200,000,000 at pre-war rate of exchange. In this connection the following, taken from the *Financier* of August 7, 1918, will be found instructive: "Many commodities are scarce nowadays through the want of tonnage to bring them from foreign countries. A further contributive cause is the dearth of bags, in which grain, sugar, etc., are shipped; the price of jute sacks has accordingly risen to unknown heights. Hence the prosperity of the Indian jute companies, three of which, the Victoria, Titaghur, and Samnugger, have doubled their dividend to 20 per cent for the past year, against 10 per cent for 1916. The shares are tightly held in Dundee."

*Specimen Wages in the Tanneries and Leather Works of Cawnpore—*

Un-hairers and fleshers-----	\$4.00	} per month
Scourers and setters-----	4.00	
Slicker whiteners -----	5.33	
Machine operators -----	7.16	

*Specimen Wages to Workmen in Coal Mines—*

The average daily wage per head is 15 cents.

The annual raisings per head of labor employed below ground for all India, 169.4

In reference to wages must be mentioned some ways devised to throw dust in the eyes of the unwary. Some manufacturers have started what they call a gratuity fund. Mr. M. C. Sitaraman, a retired weaving master of the Carnatic Mills of Madras, where this "Gratuity Fund" is worked, has well described its mode:

The Gratuity Fund for workmen is a very ingenious device for securing constant and steady labor. It has its merits as well as its faults. A laborer, after ten years of satisfactory and *continuous* service, gets between five per cent and ten per cent of his total wages. On the other hand, it turns a workman into an avaricious and spiritless slave of the system. Desirous of securing the gratuity fund, a workman gradually loses his self-respect, puts up with treatments which under ordinary circumstances he would have revolted from, and invariably becomes a mere beast to dance to the tunes and insolent whims of his arbitrary superior in the department. It emasculates the workman and emboldens the foreman to stretch the exercise of his arbitrary power to the vanishing limit. Here I may mention a case that I know which has a touch of tragedy in its committal. A workman stole a lea (120 yds.) of red yarn to make a waist thread. He was found out at the gate, brought to the manager, who, after referring to the register, dismissed him without the least concern on his part. Usually stealing of a trivial nature is punished by the same manager by a fine of 25c. or 50c. This particular workman had faithfully served nine years and eight months, and he was to get at his gratuity a lump sum of \$50 in another four months. The man, broken-hearted, went home as if to his own funeral. I wish that workmen who have put in more than five years of service be treated more generously than in the above case by the mill authorities.

## Capacity

The inefficiency of the Indian workman is often adduced as the cause of low wages. The factory system in India is already fifty years old, and it is inconceivable that the Indian workman has made no progress. "India is the mother country of the textile industry, and up to the time of Arkwright possessed the monopoly of fine yarns"; outside experts like Mr. James Platt and Mr. Henry Lee are of opinion that "in no country on earth, except in Lancashire, do the operatives possess such a natural leaning to the textile industry as in India"; Dr. G. Von Schultze-Gaevernitz, a German expert, said in 1895 that the Indian laborer "does not stand far behind the German"—that was twenty-five years ago. Dr. Nair, in his *Minute of Dissent to the Report of the Indian Factory Labor Commission*, says:

And at the present time, according to the very careful calculations made by Mr. Simpson, of Messrs. Binny & Co., of Madras, a cotton mill in Madras with 35,000 ring spindles, 800 looms, average count 16s., working 67½ hours a week, would employ 2,622 operatives all told. Whereas for a similar mill in Lancashire, working 54½ hours a week, the total number of hands required would be 982, which works out a proportion of 2.62 Indian hands to one English hand. And if we also consider that the average monthly wage of a Lancashire operative will be about \$20, and the average monthly wage of a Madras operative is \$5, it is clear that *for the same money the Indian millowner gets nearly double the work that an English millowner does.* . . . Before condemning the Indian operative as inefficient and incapable of improvement he ought to be given a fair hearing. In a memorial submitted to His Excellency, the Marquis of Lansdowne, Viceroy and Governor-General of India in 1883, by the mill operatives of Bombay, it was stated that "it has been said to the detriment of your petitioners that an Indian mill operative is not as hard working as his brother workman in England, and that a mill operative in England does the work of three men employed on the same work in an Indian mill. . . . The real cause of this, your Lordship's petitioners submit, is the bad machinery and the bad raw material used in the mills. . . . The breakage in the thread is so continuous here on account of the bad quality of the cotton that millowners are compelled to employ more men." As the effect of the long hours has to be considered before judging of the idle habits of the Indian operatives, so the quality of the raw material they have to handle has to be taken into consideration before the extent of their skilfulness or otherwise is determined.

It is also very necessary to point out that the so-called inefficiency of the Indian workman is rooted in a diseased body, and on "the incessant strain on his nerves amidst the din and noise of machinery in the stuffy atmosphere of the factory." Major F. Norman White, M.D., I.M.S., Sanitary Commissioner with the Government of India, writes: "A large part of the relative inefficiency of the Indian labor is due to removable pathological causes." He makes a pertinent remark and I quote it here with a request that it may be considered in the light of all its implications: "Had the large employer of labor a plentiful supply of really healthy material to start with, he would still be under an obligation to secure for his operatives an environment above reproach; how much greater is the present need for hygienic environment, when in most cases cure has to precede the conservation of health?" One more quotation from this expert is necessary, as it is



an important deduction relating to the subject in hand: "All are agreed that the organized labor of India (he means factory labor; not labor organized in trade unions or labor centres) is relatively inefficient, and that the wage-earning capacity is low. It is difficult to assess the importance of disease as a contributory cause of this state of affairs."

### Health and Sanitation

Progressive sanitation is not a feature of the official programme. The *Indian Labor Factory Commission Report* records how "one witness of long practical experience stated that any man would feel exhausted even if he merely sat in a chair in some of the workrooms for eight or nine hours, the atmosphere was so foul." Sir Bhalchandra Krishna, an eminent physician and publicist of Bombay, said to the Commission that there was physical deterioration among the millhands, and was careful enough to point out that "it is due to bad ventilation in the mills." Doctor Chavan, a medical man of Ratnagiri, the district from which a large number of mill operatives come to Bombay, and one who has a large practice among them, is of opinion that "the mill operatives suffer to a very large extent from phthisis and dyspepsia." The hovels in which they are compelled to live, the malnutrition which follows on low earnings, the premature exhaustion caused by long hours necessitate extraordinary sanitary facilities; but the Government of India are very backward in the matter of sanitation, and the necessity of special factory sanitation has not yet occurred to them. The recently published *Indian Industrial Commission Report* includes among its contents a paper on "Industrial Development and Public Health" by the Sanitary Commissioner with the Government of India, in which the expert says that "the subject of industrial hygiene has received remarkably little attention in India, until quite recent times, and to-day its importance is not fully recognized in any part of the country."

### Education

Much has been said of the illiteracy of the Indian laborer. It is true that the average Indian laborer is not able to read or write. He and his educated countrymen have for many years demanded that primary education should be made free and compulsory, but the Government of India have failed to respond to that demand. However, it must be noted that the masses in India—and among them are the factory laborers—have a culture of their own. *Their power of understanding political and economic issues and suggesting proper remedies in a practical manner is well known to those who have worked for and with them. Their political instincts are clear and strong. Their ability to organize themselves was recently manifested in the formation of the trade unions in Madras referred to above; and it will be an agreeable surprise to lovers of labor in America to*

note that a few months ago in Bombay a general strike of textile workers was declared and maintained for several days without any trade union organization in existence there. That strike involved some 70,000 laborers. This instance is given to show that Indian laborers do possess the capacity to combine and organize effectively.

Lack of education, however, prevails. A few employers have opened schools for the children of their employees. Much is made by clever capitalists of such institutions, and instances are not wanting where the Government has given prominence to such ventures. But attention must be drawn to the important fact that it is one of the devices to enslave labor. To quote a retired weaving master, Mr. M. C. Sitaraman, of the Carnatic Mills at Madras: "The school, general and technical in character, is the best part of the whole affair—the best part of the institute from the manufacturer's point of view. This pays him in dollars and cents. This school trains up boys to become intelligent and skilled laborers and coolie clerks. This serves as a strong link of connection as well between the employers and the employees even under strained relationship." Even the *Indian Industrial Commission Report*, published a few months ago, disposes of the whole problem in two short paragraphs under the heading "Education of Factory Children." What hope is there, then, for the future?

### Housing

As in the matter of education, the problem of housing has not attracted very serious attention from the Government. Some manufacturers have started schools for the children of their employees, so others have put up huts and houses for them. They have done this to secure some permanence in the fluctuating Indian labor, and as the *Indian Industrial Commission Report* says, "in such cases employers have often found it impossible to obtain labor without providing accommodation"; and, again, "the more enlightened factory owner has found it advisable to provide accommodation on an increasing scale, recognizing that, though the rent which he can obtain will not pay him more than a trifling percentage on his outlay, the mill which houses its laborers best will command the pick of the labor market, especially in the case of such a fluid labor force as that on which the textile factories rely."

The actual conditions under which the laborers live are indescribable. In the City of Bombay—Urbs Prima in Indies—744,000 working men are tenanted in one-roomed houses; the room is generally eight feet by ten feet, and a death rate of 60 per 1,000 is known to prevail.



## The Moral Issue

In dealing with the problems of education, housing, gratuity fund, etc., I may have appeared to be unappreciative of the manufacturers who have tried to run schools or build houses or start gratuity funds. The factor to be borne in mind in this connection is the innate culture of the Indian laborer, which loathes the idea of slavery in any shape or form. The Indian laborers want to have schools for their children, houses for themselves, better wages and shorter hours—all as a matter of right and justice. The efforts on the part of the employers to patronize the laborers are seen as fetters of slavery, albeit golden fetters instead of iron ones. I have not referred to the iron fetters of personal abuse, kicking and other brutal practices that still prevail on plantations and in factories. The Madras Labor Union is trying to put a stop to them by legal means. The new spirit is in evidence among Indian laborers who will not tolerate such brutalities any more; but it is well to recognize that even the above-named golden fetters are resented and the Indian laborer feels that he is not only a “hand,” but also that he has a head and a heart, and aspires to come unto his own.

## Non-Factory Labor

While there is a semblance of factory legislation, labor outside the factory has not even that much of protection. Agricultural labor, on plantations and other places, has its own untold woes. The conditions in the mine settlements—e. g., Kolar goldfield—are not easily describable. Let me speak of the large body of clerks in shops—especially shops in the wholesale Indian markets. There is no Shops Closing Act to limit the duration of their working day; there is no shop-inspector; the twelve-hour day of the factory laborer does not apply to the shop-worker; they are “free to work” as long as they please, or, rather, as long as their benevolent masters like; they have no Sunday as a weekly holiday. Besides the occasional festivals—a few days in the year—only once a month, on each new moon day, the bazaars (market) are closed. The Indian bazaar does not recognize the value or necessity of a weekly day of rest. The bazaar opens early in the morning and does not close till very late at night. The European shops and Indian shops managed on European lines have fixed hours of work and Sunday as holiday, but Indian markets, with their thousands upon thousands of employees, have excessive hours without the weekly rest on Sundays. The wages of these shop employees are scandalously low and their prospects poor. The average man begins at \$5 per month, and unless he proves to be exceptionally able, he has no hopes of rising above \$20 per month, or so, at the end of his career. He only lives on the hope of a partnership or of setting up an independent business some day.

Lest it be understood that the capitalistic public is the only culprit in this matter, let it be made clear that Government sets them a good example.

The Government is as much an exploiter of non-factory labor as any merchant prince or capitalistic concern. Take post office wages and see the rise the Government has worked in that department in the course of nearly half a century:

1875—Wages ran between \$1.37 to \$2.37 per month.

1915—Wages ran between \$2.12 to \$2.56 per month.

I have purposely taken the Postal Department because of an incident to which I wish to draw the very pertinent attention of the Laborites and Trade Unionists everywhere. Here it is:

There was recently a postal strike in Calcutta, and the grievances of the postmen, as is generally the case with labor troubles, related to the question of improvement in their pay. The matter, however, went to the police court, and six of the "ringleaders" in the strike have been sentenced to three weeks' rigorous imprisonment each, and eight others to a fine of \$7.00 each, or, in default, to ten days' rigorous imprisonment. Dealing with this particular matter, a "Disgusted Briton" writes to the *Statesman* of Calcutta:

All of these men are striking as a method of protest against that "graded salary of \$5.00 rising to \$8.25, which they hold to be insufficient to maintain themselves and their families, and which is below the rates paid to men in similar positions in Bombay. If the law obtaining in India permits the infliction of sentences of imprisonment for such so-called "offences" as these, surely it is about time the law was altered. If the sentences were permissible under the Defence of India Act, they would seem a gross misuse of power. It is easy, on \$333.33 a month or over, to damn these poor men for causing us inconvenience; it is shameful to misuse our powers to imprison them. The rise in the cost of living in Calcutta is known to all, and when these men follow the countless precedents of the United Kingdom to endeavor to better their condition, we give them an answer that not only smacks of disgruntled despotism, but damns British justice, whatever the law may be.

### Conclusion

The Government of India is an autocracy. The Indian Reforms under discussion in Parliament plainly indicate that the present machinery of autocracy will be maintained. The ears of autocracy are always deaf to the groans of the sufferer. The voice of the poor factory laborer will not even reach those ears, for it will be drowned amid the droning of the machinery of the rich capitalist, and the latter is the friend of the Government. There is a serious attempt to establish a living brotherhood of the laborers of the world, and the Indian laborers fondly look to organized labor in the United States to champion their cause. As their spokesman, on their behalf, I am putting forward this condensed statement. I appeal to those who hold the cause of Labor and Trade Unionism sacred to stretch their hands of fellowship to their comrades in India. Remember the Cause of Labor is one.